

## **RECAP: HIV Empowerment Workshop**

I had to drag myself up from bed on the morning of Nov 19, as I just didn't feel like attending the Kuala Lumpur AIDS Services Society (KLASS) HIV empowerment workshop. I surrendered reluctantly when I recalled that I had foolishly agreed to drive participants to the workshop venue that morning. As I grudgingly packed for the workshop, I envisioned the disappointment on the faces of people in my life if I chickened out of this workshop. Well, how bad can it be? I'll try to keep a low profile and just get through the day.

The Empowerment workshop, financed by the Malaysian AIDS Council and organized by KLASS, addresses the HIV needs of Chinese & Indian speaking people living with HIV/AIDS. Because these individuals are not fluent in either English or Malay (our national language), they often are underserved by government service agencies. So, at this specialized workshop, either Mandarin or Cantonese was to be the language of communication. I was both excited and anxious about this aspect, as this was to be the first time in my adult life attending a Chinese-speaking workshop, let alone on a health topic where I have listened and conversed exclusively in English. Absentmindedly, I forgot my glasses, and ended up sitting in the front row where I occasionally translated English terms into Chinese for the audience!

The 33 workshop participants came from all walks of life, ranging from primary school teachers, night market hawkers, housewives, music teachers, hairstylists, businessmen, university students, to TV channel managers (That's me!). HIV truly does not DISCRIMINATE!

Honestly, for a newly HIV diagnosed person, I was initially overwhelmed by the depressive topics such as HIV/AIDS diagnosis, side effects of HIV Medications, skin infections /diseases related to HIV/AIDS (oh, there were also horrible slides used for illustration). Fortunately, I didn't shut down my mind and stop listening, despite these disturbing images and medical content.

A French music video, which they played during the workshop, made a strong impression on me. I don't understand French and cannot understand the lyrics of the song, but the nonverbal body language of the artistes in the video really didn't need much translation. A guy was asking for free hugs. Initially no one responded, but towards the end, people began to respond and hugged him a lot. All kinds of people, old, young, black, white, healthy, disabled embraced him. Some even waited in line just to give him a hug. This last scene touched me profoundly. This was precisely how I felt when I was first diagnosed. I was all alone, fearful that people would be so disgusted and that no one will even touch or hug me again (especially during the first few days). Questions flooded in, ones that I've never entertained before as a gay man: Will I ever have a child of my own? Will I be able to get married? Will I be able to immigrate to another country?

Back to the French video, I now recognize that as I know more HIV+ people who are in the same boat as me, I feel less and less alone. More importantly, I now know that there are lots of caring people out there who are willing to give me warm and comforting hugs, like so many of my dear HIV- friends reading this essay, and a few new friends whom I've never even met in person! I weep quietly but these are not tears of sadness, but tears of touching joy!

I cried again a second time when a KLASS volunteer shared her life story in the afternoon. She was infected by her husband, who passed away when she was at her weakest, with a CD4 count of 12. She circulated an old photo of herself taken at that time, showing a thin, haggard, very sickly and sad

looking face staring blankly at the camera. But today, Ah Yen is bubbly, cheerful, and healthy-looking; a totally different person. I don't quite understand the process, but her personal story absolutely rocked me to the core, and subtly awakened something important in me. Her testimony was followed by other very moving personal stories from others.

I knew right from the start of the workshop that I would share my personal story with everyone, but am unsure about which aspects to include. With four speakers remaining, I stood up to share my journey. It was increasingly obvious after listening to the stories of others here that I had to be one of the damn luckiest persons in the room. From the very beginning to this moment, I had friends and my Malaysian gay brothers with me on this journey! What more could I have asked for?

One of the strangest assignments my friend gave me during the first days of my diagnosis was to come up with a list of good things that resulted from my HIV diagnosis. You can imagine my utter disbelief at such a ridiculous request, for at that time, I could not think of being HIV positive as ever being positive. Reluctantly I agreed to populate that list, and after a few difficult days, I shared my very short list with him. We discussed each item on my list, and then he advised me to add to this list as I learn more in life. At this workshop, I decided to share this wonderful list of good things that came about after my first diagnosis on June 1:

- Life in general seems smoother
- There are lots of positive couples around
- There are positive ways of life, and it's not the end of the world
- For a moment in time on June 1, I became the Center of the universe
- 萬千寵愛在一身! (Twice! The second time was when I went to Singapore & my ex gave me the iPad!)
- Bonds with close friends are stronger
- There are lots of caring positive people around
- Learning to take care of myself first (The true realization of this started only after the workshop)

At the end of my sharing, I promised to take better care of myself first and then to help others around me who need my help.

At the end of the workshop, I made a declaration to myself (almost made it public though) that I will organize another similar workshop for KLASS in 6 – 8 months. It is truly amazing how profoundly life changing this empowerment workshop has been.

When I returned home on November 21, I observed subtle changes taking place about my personal self-care. I was starting to put myself FIRST. I don't know why but I found myself boiling water to drink, instead of merely drinking tap water as in the past. I also scheduled bedtime at 10pm, and oh, one more thing that I am sure of... my drug using days were OVER!

***Written by Mr. Purple***